

## MEMORANDUM

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE  
INSTRUCTIONS APPLYTHE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTONMEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS                      University Student Body Presidents  
   Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, Assistant to the  
   President for National Security Affairs

DATE AND TIME:                      Tuesday, March 2, 1971  
   5:45 - 7: p.m.

PLACE:                                  White House Situation Room

Dr. Kissinger began by going over the ground rules. He said the students were free to characterize him in any way they wished, but he did not wish to be quoted. He did not want any substance to be repeated on the outside, for this could go to the newspapers. He acknowledged that there were no constraints on the students except their sense of honor. He then said that rather than make long statements he thought it was better if he let them ask questions. He noted that there were some constraints on the time he had available to meet with them.

The Stanford representative (Political Science) mentioned that the students had talked with others in the Administration, and in response to Dr. Kissinger's question, he identified some of them as being William <sup>Sullivan</sup> of the State Department, Dolf Droge of the NSC Staff, and Robert Finch, the Presidential Counsellor. According to Droge, one of the principal reasons for a considerable presence in Vietnam through this summer was to preserve a stable environment for the village elections. If the operations in Laos, Cambodia, and the Delta were all successful, he wondered whether the Administration envisaged the possibility of withdrawing all fighting forces within 12 months.

Dr. Kissinger said that he would like to state the general attitude of the Administration toward withdrawals, to speak of philosophy first and then tactics. He remarked that many students and university personnel seemed to think that the Administration's overwhelming desire was to stay in Indochina as long as possible. Unless there was unremitting pressure from the outside, we would find a clever way to stay. There were many arguments, but he wished to discuss the purposes first to which tactics were subordinate.

This Administration wants to leave Vietnam as much as the students do, although it was a less personal problem than for those who might have to go to Vietnam itself. He doubted the latter possibility. The students must

believe that the Administration wants to get out as soon as possible or the tactical answers would not help; they would consider them trick answers. He recognized what had happened during the past years, no matter whose fault it was, and that nothing the Administration said would convince them. Therefore, the Administration will be judged by performance. If it is to bring this country together, it ought not be so much by rhetoric as by performance. Included in this is the question of how it handles the issue of Vietnam.

Withdrawal deadlines are essentially tactical. He was convinced that if the Administration wrote out its schedule for withdrawals and some of the critics wrote out their schedule the difference between the two perhaps might be worth a political debate, but certainly not a massive demonstration. There was a fundamental disagreement with those who say get out now, whereas with the others it was a matter of tactics. For those who favored some form of gradualism, whether a withdrawal schedule was 12 months or 15 months was essentially a tactical question. One important tactical difference was the following. The Administration believed there is a limited chance of getting out quicker through negotiations than through a graduated deadline or at least ending the war quicker. It believed that the best bargaining weapon was our troops and that therefore a certain amount of ambiguity on the schedule gave the other side an incentive to negotiate. Once they knew the unalterable deadline they had no choice but to wait for that deadline. Once the Administration was convinced that there would be no negotiations, the deadline would not be an important issue anymore in this country. Therefore, the Administration's weaseling on the deadline should not lead to a credibility gap. Students could judge after a certain period whether or not he was telling the truth. It is a question whether genuine negotiations could get us out faster than setting a deadline now. Maybe the Administration was dead wrong; maybe it was impossible to get negotiations. But one should think of what it would do for this country if, after all this anguish, one could bring off such negotiations.

He could say that in 12 months almost certainly all combat troops would have been withdrawn. However, the problem was that one then sees an MP standing around with a pistol and a problem arose. In the sense about how combat troops would actually be used, there was a high probability, however, that within 12 months they would all be out.

The Harvard representative (History Major). We are worried about different residual forces, and are not sure what the Administration is doing on withdrawals. For example, there would be 75,000 Americans flying air support, staying there, etc.

Dr. Kissinger said that he understood this concern. Once our troops were below a certain point, then their significance in combat is more and more marginal. He was worried about the debate on college campuses about the

dropping of bombs. There was a tendency to break people down into two groups, some who wanted to kill and others who wanted to end the killing. The first characterization must be stopped. He pointed out that it was not just the South Vietnamese who were killing or who were invading. There was no question that the killing of innocent civilians should be stopped. What the US has attempted to do is bring about the possibility for self-determination. In Cambodia, for example, no South Vietnamese were ever there until last year. If the North Vietnamese withdrew, there would be no need for anyone else to be in their country. Otherwise one is, in effect, saying turn the country over to the Communists. This was the thesis of the Dan Ellsberg article in the New York Review.

The Administration's intention was to eliminate American participation in the war, including the dropping of bombs. The number of Americans involved is kept deliberately open for the reasons he had explained. Maybe there is one chance in three or four that we could end the war through negotiations, and this the Administration was trying to do. He asked the students to look at the specific proposals the US had made. It was hard to say that we haven't tried, recognizing that elections had a different significance in Vietnam than they do here.

The Vassar representative (Political Science) said that Dr. Kissinger should distinguish between the students who were there as individuals, particularly their majors, and the campuses they represented. He said that last November he had been at West Point and there were two sections of people discussing the war. The first section upheld Nixon's negotiating proposals and the second were in favor of points 5, 6 and 7 of the NLF's proposals. It was no longer a question of rational assessments. There was an emotional mood, psychological gut-reactions, built up by the time factor and the conflict of ideas and ideals. The students perceived the criticality of the emotional issue and the time factor more than Washington saw it. They had to deal with it administratively everyday; it was not just hearsay. The students saw these reactions reflected in ways not connected with the war or student government.

Dr. Kissinger proposed a hypothetical choice. Suppose there were great demonstrations and President Nixon went on TV and said that he couldn't take it any more and he was going to end the war the next day. Compare this scenario to a reasonable time frame in which the Administration did everything it said it would and ended the war and the U.S. role, ideally through negotiations, although with great travail. He asked which would be better for the students three years from now. In the first case would they say the bastards collapsed and had no courage of their convictions, and in the second case that although they didn't like the Administration they at least ended the war. They would then debate something else. Did they know which was better in 1971?

The Stanford representative (Political Science). What concerned us was that several schools would not even come to these sessions. They were through talking to the Administration. Many were here last Spring, but had a feeling they were going nowhere. Many students, under the reported theory of alienation/apathy really wanted nothing to do with the system or were very mad. He wondered what would happen if this emotion kept building up.

Dr. Kissinger said that he could assure them that by next year they would see that every month the promises that the Administration had made were being kept.

The Harvard representative said that it did not seem that they were talking about the same thing. For example, Governor Harriman said that we could negotiate if we really wished to. Neither the U.S. nor North Vietnam wanted China to control the region and they could between them set up a stable coalition government.

Dr. Kissinger said that Harriman said this to him often at great length.

The Harvard representative continued that Senator McGovern talked about the indiscriminate raining of bombs on people. Jim Thomson, who had the same information as government officials, comes to completely different conclusions. These different views were mystifying to him.

Dr. Kissinger remarked that after his session last year with Stanford, he never had faculty present with students. He would always meet them separately. Students talked about fundamental problems whereas the faculty concentrated on tactics. He noted that the names that had been mentioned were all good friends of his. McGovern was a fine, sensitive man that he had known for a long time. And he used to work with Harriman.

The Harvard representative remarked that this made it more mystifying.

Dr. Kissinger rejoined that the students' generation has the problem of a demoralization of his generation for complicated reasons. As for Harriman's contention that there was a possibility of a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam on terms other than those of handing over South Vietnam, there was not one scintilla of evidence to this effect. If the Administration could ever publish negotiating efforts on various levels, it could at least demonstrate that it had looked at these things. Hanoi says that we must withdraw unconditionally and set up a coalition government consisting of 1/3rd from the Saigon Administration, 1/3rd from a third force and 1/3rd of the coalition government and have a veto over the other 2/3rds, accepting only those who stood for "peace, independence and neutrality".

He suggested the students read the President's April 20 speech and its political principles which had been reaffirmed several times since. We have proposed elections, but recognize that elections are not the traditional method of settling issues in Vietnam. If the other side talks reasonably we would be flexible. Each side should have the power that its support entitles it. The other side never come to us and said let's talk about some non-electoral process for political power. The Administration would leave to history a judgement on negotiating efforts.

He could understand Harriman's feelings that he had almost a negotiated settlement in his grasp as a capstone to his career. His generation had had a traumatic experience having lived through a decade which started with the assassination of JFK and ended in Vietnam. Two assassinations and the war symbolized all this. There was a profound malaise and so many predictions had gone wrong. People now believe the only way to end the war was to destroy all previous theories.

He noted the minority platform at the Democrat's 1968 Chicago convention which Humphrey had refused to accept. The Administration has exceeded this platform in every respect. He didn't mean this as criticism but only to show how fast and far things had evolved in the last couple of years. He pointed out the problem that the Administration had in not being supported by those elements of leadership whose support it needed.

The Vassar representative said that a false dichotomy was set up. There was a third possibility, that of restructuring the nature of government. Government had usurped power and didn't incorporate all elements of society. What happens on campuses was hearsay and was not incorporated as other parts of the system were in the government. Droge's presentation had struck them. He had information available which was not disseminated to the public. Unless one were an expert it was difficult. The information could be presented in ways that would bring out a rational debate.

Dr. Kissinger agreed that the campus felt alienated and so did many of the faculty and the intellectual community. Vassar remarked that there were more than these. Dr. Kissinger contended that he took no comfort in the fact but it was nevertheless true that students were alienated from the vast majority of society.

Vassar remarked that 75% of the youth under 30 had had some experience with college.

Dr. Kissinger remarked that not all of them agreed with one another, however. He had spent more time with students than with any other group, including Cabinet members. During the Cambodian operations he had spent two hours every day with students. He invited everyone to come back

later. Few had come back. Some said we will put the dialogue on the basis of stop murdering children. He asked how many campuses he could appear at without there being riots. He therefore thought that part of the problem was on the side of the university as regards dialogue. Essentially the first thing that happened when people disagreed was that they began to destroy the character of those with whom they disagreed. The viciousness of the dialogue required policing by the students on the campus. Dialogue was not a one way proposition. Government leadership had to build 4/5ths of the way, but the campuses in turn had to go 1/5th of the way.

The NYU representative in response to the question of why there was violence and terrorism noted the tactics that the President had used in the elections last year. These were very purposeful and very deliberate. They incited the working man to look at long hair with disdain. It was a deliberate attempt to polarize the electorate. He thought that history would condemn the President more than any other for this. A civil war was one in which one type of person was polarized versus other groups.

All his conscious life he had lived with Vietnam with no impact. He noted that Dr. Kissinger and others had eliminated other people from policy making. The structure remained the same. He mentioned also the records of civilians that the military kept. All this was scary for youths who knew nothing else in their conscious lives.

Dr. Kissinger mentioned the least important point that had been made first, namely that the army civilian investigations had been a problem that this Administration had inherited and stopped. He agreed that it was still a problem. The growth of investigations, even where legitimate, were resulting in files that were a national problem. Even if one took the investigations of defense employees, this problem multiplied and it was an important national question. It was not a question of evil people out to do something, but rather that bureaucrats performing their functions were creating juggernaut.

Dr. Kissinger commented on the allegation that the President and he bypassed elected officials. Many said this, but it simply was not true. One of the reasons for the changes in the government machinery was to stop the practice of the previous Administration where there was no formality and where the last person in the Oval Office might come out with a decision. There used to be a meeting with advisors once a week and no record, no decisions kept, and no systematic look at the consequences. The new NSC system gives every agency an opportunity to be heard. He did not deny that he had great information, but every decision was made with senior advisors present. The responsible Cabinet members were always present. No decision was ever made without the Under Secretary level first looking at it. For example, the Senior Review Group agencies all looked at the issues and

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said that they saw the following choices. He had a staff member who checked published literature to make sure that no choices were left out. Then these analyses were sent to the NSC. At the NSC meeting he would start and outline the choices for the President. Then the Secretaries of State and Defense and the others would each present their views.

Whenever anyone claims that they were excluded from the decisions, this was a flat self-serving lie. There was no exception to this rule. He would present issues and say nothing. The President calls then on the Secretary of State and Defense. After the NSC meeting the President would often go off by himself and write down the pros and cons. He might ask him for his opinions and ask what he might have left out. He did not deny that he had influence. However, people were always present when decisions were made and announced. This did not make the decisions necessarily right, he acknowledged. One thing one could say about this government as opposed to the LBJ administration was that it was not capricious. They had gotten a sense of formality and seriousness. They asked where we wished to be five years from now.

For example, in this Administration, Arms Control and State could help formulate the Defense budget, whereas previously they had a crack at the budget only two weeks before it went to the printer. In a Monday meeting they had started to consider Defense programs for FY 73. Arms Control, State and domestic agencies all had a crack at the Pentagon.

One could attack the Administration's decisions and they could be wrong. However, he wanted the system to survive, and it was designed to spread responsibility rather than to concentrate it. We don't let anyone run into the President, neither the JCS or anyone else, with an end run point of view.

NYU commented that CIA seemed to have complete autonomy, for example in Laos or overthrowing governments.

Dr. Kissinger remarked that this was a different problem. The CIA role in Laos took place long before this Administration came into office. CIA had a smaller role in this Administration than previous ones. For example, they only presented factual briefings not policy formulations, although he recognized they could sneak in their prejudices in their briefings. CIA could not overthrow governments. An example of an overthrow was Cambodia. The Administration believed that they had a finite chance to

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bring off negotiations when Sihanouk was overthrown. At the time there were no CIA personnel even in the country. Outside groups greatly overestimated the ability of CIA to do things. The big problem of modern government, CIA included, is that it becomes impenetrable. The students' problem was how in a big government and a society run by big structures they could get hold of decisions. Big decisions were made often by default. That was the important problem, not CIA which was not the biggest one in any event. It was easier to manage than others in the bureaucracy.

Dr. Kissinger agreed that the student generation had despair; this was a universal phenomenon in many countries with very different social and political structures. This was the problem of our time. He had no good answers or any answers. One should recognize, however, that it was not only due to any particular evils occurring at one time. There was a problem of dialogue.

He cited the example of the Annual Report. Five members for the last three months had killed themselves getting out this report. There was nothing in it for the Administration. They could have put out balderdash. However, we had gone ahead. Not everyone would agree with the conclusions but we hoped they would believe that serious and concerned people were addressing their destinies. He didn't know whatever emotional reassurances it would give, but at least it would help to get people to be compassionate. He hoped to separate disagreement over philosophy and disagreement over tactics. There should be greater opposition on details rather than philosophy.

The reaction [to the report] had been disappointing. It was mostly on Laos, and the philosophy of the document was not mentioned and no debate was sparked. With that sort of response we could have put out a report in two weeks and a press release.

He was noting that the difficulties of dialogue existed on both sides. This group had nothing to do with the reaction. He said that the people who had put the report together had killed themselves and were not necessarily Republicans and couldn't care less about this particular Administration.

Penn State said that the crisis was in democracy in general. There was a general withdrawal from governmental processes, a blowing up of buildings. Regardless of good intentions, there were not perceived or proved by action. People were no longer willing to believe. He cited the examples of the number of planes shot down and how if only the tail of our helicopter was left it was not considered shot down. He



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also cited misleading body counts. The public never seemed to get real factual data. There were always contradictions. They wondered if anything was the truth.

Dr. Kissinger acknowledged the truth of this, but said that sometimes there was a malaise and distrust also among the press. He cited the example of Laos where all hell was breaking loose a year ago so the Administration tried to put out all the facts on U.S. policy in that country. We asked the Pentagon how many advisors had been killed and were told that none had been killed. At the time 50 would have sounded like a small number. During the next six weeks we found that twelve had been killed and spent all our time trying to explain why we had lied to the American people. It was simply a matter of a stupid bureaucratic goofup. There was nothing in it for the White House to say that no advisors had been killed. We could have made the point with a small number of killed in action. They had all been killed in the previous administration in any event. By the time this process was through it was not that the Administration for the first time had told the truth about Laos, but had added one more lie to the series. This kind of episode demonstrates where we are today in this country.

Penn State noted that 70 percent of the American people did not believe that U.S. troops were not being used in Laos.

Dr. Kissinger remarked that a large majority believe that we are already there.

Georgetown (English) thought that accountability was a big problem, on campus where students want control over their lives in the big environment. He mentioned the Symington speech and the Kissinger influence on decisions and not testifying.

Dr. Kissinger said he would describe the situation exactly. He had no discretion. There was a long standing practice where for every President the Assistants to the President did not testify. No Presidential Assistant had ever testified before Congressional committees. The reason was that Presidential Assistants do not act on their own. The Secretary of State, for example, represents a department and is confirmed by the Senate and is therefore accountable. He was not supposed to have, and had tried not to, represent an independent influence. His advice was personal. He repeated that assistants to the principals do not testify before the Congress. George Shultz, as Director of the Budget, was in a position where that person always testified about the structure of the budget and nothing else. No other assistant in the Administration, in any Administration, ever testified.

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The President and he had recognized the problem of communication, however, and therefore had proposed to Fulbright last year that while he could not come before the Committee, if he was invited by the Chairman to his house for drinks and all the rest of the Committee showed up he would be willing to answer questions. There were two such meetings of three hours each. There was a hiatus after Cambodia which was not caused by him [Kissinger]. He called Fulbright last December to try to establish the dialogue and got no response. He then went to Javits and asked him to talk to Fulbright. He said he was prepared to meet with the Committee on a personal basis. After Fulbright spoke on Sunday he again offered to meet again with the Committee at his home or on a quasi-social occasion. He had met with every member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee individually, with Senator Church, for example, three different times. He was not formally accountable, but had made every effort within limits of not taking a public position. It was an established rule that Presidential assistants should not operate as public figures on their own. The problem for the President is that everyone wants something. Someone must order the tons of paper that flows into him.

As for the Symington speech, he recognized that it was getting close to election year, and he supposed that he would be taken on in public. He believed he had stretched the rules to the limit. That is why he always requested that he did not want to be quoted. He wanted to protect the President, not himself. The President or his Secretary of State were the spokesmen for foreign policy.

Georgetown said that when he asked why the cost of the war in lives and dollars and in the social fabric had to continue, why this had to happen, he got a number of different answers. From Sullivan, for example, he got ethnic diversity and stopping the imperialism of the Tonkinese. Dr. Kissinger had mentioned self-determination. He wondered what the conditions were for getting out. What would happen if they pulled out in 12 months and then there was a collapse?

Dr. Kissinger noted that the original decisions were made in 1963. He had expressed his views on the purposes of our Vietnam policy in an article he had written in 1968. And his views remained basically the same. He did not believe the consequences of actions were examined, and the assumptions of actions were not tested. That was one reason this Administration had set up its governmental machinery, to try to look at consequences. They might still make the wrong choices. The problem of this Administration was not why we should stay but how we should get out without doing more damage than had already been done. The judgment of the Administration was that that peace of the world and the coherence of our society meant that

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we should go out gradually. If it were demonstrated clearly that South Vietnam could never defend itself, then we would have to make difficult decisions. It was inconceivable to him that we would keep a government in power propped up for all eternity if it couldn't keep itself going by other means.

Georgetown said that it was really therefore a domestic political question.

Dr. Kissinger replied that it depended on the Administration's judgment. If before the South Vietnamese fate was clear, the Administration judged that the American political system could not tolerate further involvement, then we would have to quit before making a judgment about South Vietnam's future. We had not judged that the domestic situation was such up to now.

Dr. Kissinger remarked that he had to go to a dinner for the SALT delegation and asked the students how long they would be here. They replied that they were leaving that day and asked him to dinner. Dr. Kissinger said that he would very much like to do so, but had to attend this other dinner. He invited them to come back in a few weeks and have dinner. Then they could continue to ask their questions.

New Hampshire said that he could not go back to his campus without saying to you the feelings of the students that he had talked to. The feeling on the majority's part was that after last spring what good did nonviolence do. It did not seem to get anywhere. Now students dropped out and were indifferent. Now with Laos during the last couple of weeks they were frustrated in a way that he hadn't seen during Cambodia. He was scared, and he wanted to relay this feeling to Dr. Kissinger. New Hampshire was basically conservative, and the students were not radical, yet he was scared with what the students were showing. The question in most peoples' mind was are we trying to save face when we say we want an honorable way out. This reflects back on negotiations. How much pressure was there for negotiations when there is a matter of saving face over the real consequences. The students believe that Laos and Cambodia were examples of how we were trying to save face for the American public.

Dr. Kissinger asked whose face we were saving. The Administration's belief has been that an honorable withdrawal was a more meaningful way of putting it than the slogan of saving face. The question is how to do things that we must and want to do. We want to end the war but not to turn over the country to the Communists unless this was the decision of the South Vietnamese people. This was our one irreducible position in negotiations. He asked them to look at the evolution in negotiating positions. In 1969 no one agreed that the Communists should participate in the electoral process even as individuals in the political life. We agreed,

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and two months later not only individuals could participate but they could participate as a political party, and two months later they could share in power by elections. The one condition that we were not prepared to fulfill was to turn over the country to the Communists as a result of an American negotiating role. Dr. Kissinger remarked to the NYU student that he had said that the President would go down as the most hated man. He was not sure. It won't be recognized what he was doing but what he has done is to make possible our getting out of Vietnam without tearing this country to the pieces from the right. This occupied thought of the first two years.

He related one experience he had had. After the November 3, 1969 speech there were a flood of letters and cables, a large percentage of them spontaneous. He looked at selected ones -- 95 percent were strong endorsements of the speech. A constant sounding was "thank God my son didn't die in Vietnam or was not wounded in vain." The President must think not only of the students but of that group. We had to get out in a way that would not turn over the country to the Communists by virtue of an American decision. We believed in withdrawing through negotiations or unilaterally during a time period which the political process could stand. We had to judge whether some heat now was worth it for the longer term reconciliation later on. If the Administration were wrong they were in deep trouble.

It was a tragic process. Any time one acted -- a point he had tried to make on TV but had been misunderstood -- there were degrees of doubt. Harriman sounds like he is a hundred percent committed but really his judgment is 52/48 and then he must stick with it a hundred percent. Similarly, the Administration might believe that it was right 55 to 45 percent and it had to act as if it were a hundred percent convinced. If it succeeded we were geniuses. If it failed we were disastrous idiots. The real margin of success or failure was narrow and in either case it was a complex, delicate process. He recognized there might be little consolation from this philosophy. Only some of your colleagues could be less absolutists and recognize the contingency nature of motivations.

Stanford suggested that Dr. Kissinger might come to campuses and speak over radio stations, which would get away from the problem of riots.

Dr. Kissinger replied that he tried to avoid getting quoted in the papers, although he recognized that he was beginning to lose his virginity. It would sort of be difficult to speak on the radio without it getting into the papers, but he would think about it.

The meeting then concluded at 7:00 p.m.